

GOOD-BYE, DR. WOMBAT!

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Wombat Manor had always had an air of distinction that set it apart from any other house, but now in the dying afternoon sunshine, even after a surprise Southern California September thunderstorm, its windows blankly reflected the light of the declining daystar and seemed to have lost their whilom sparkle.

"Dwelt-in houses are all different, undwelt-in houses are all alike. Can it be that the Wombat is leaving his lair, unique among messuages in the Golden State? Why has that elegant marsupial summoned me hither?" Such were the thoughts that roved bleakly through my mind as I drove up to the porte-cochère.

The manor's chatelaine met me at the door as usual, but the chic grey traveling suit enveloping her svelte form struck a foreboding note. A fringe of voile, depending from her smart toque, veiled her magnificent eyes. Wordless she led me through the empty echoing halls to The Marsupium. Bare were all the walls; denuded all the floors. The savant sat on a built-in seat in the oriel window and was himself dressed as though about to depart: a brown fedora drawn low over his forehead, a tan trench-coat disguising his rotund shape. Shades of the thirties! My friend's Bogartesque garb drew a smile to my lips despite the pang which invaded my heart.

"So kind of you to come on such short notice, dear boy," began the Wombat. "I wanted to bid you a personal farewell, not discourteously disappear from your ken."

"Then you are leaving," I murmured.

"I am. There is a time for all passages in mortal life. I have for some time been sessile; now for some time I will be mobile. The steroid set and sweat-freaks from the whole world will soon be dropping from the skies. An incredible influx of entrepreneurs dedicated to what the Spanish delicately refer to as La Vida ('The Life') - a term as incongruous when applied to their trade as that of 'gay' when applied to the sterile nastinesses of perversion - will soon come flooding into the Loose Angles basin; one prostitute will pump out pelf for herself, another, profit for her pimp; neither will benefit this Basin of Loss Angleless. One hundred thousand cars a day will pour down the two lanes on each side of minor traffic arteries. It may be the Last Traffic Jam. In short, this Basin of Lost Angels will become hostage to the Olympics!" He sighed. "*Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis.*"

"Nice line," I sighed back.

"Yes," repeated the scholar, "'Times change and we change in them.' Do you know who said it?"

"Some classic, I guess. Maybe Lucretius."

"Not Lucretius, but a British Martial."

"A British marshal capable of such Latinity?! No wonder the British Empire civilized the world! Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne of Revolutionary War fame was a popular playwright; Sir Charles Napier combined message and pun in his famous Peccavi ('I have sinned') when he defied express orders and captured Sind; and a certain Boer War subaltern (albeit half American) went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature."

"You enthuse with too few thews," corrected the Wombat. "A British Martial! M-A-R-T-I-A-L. One John Owen. A Welshman."

"Isn't 'Owen' Welsh for 'John'? John John, then. Reminds me of some of the kids with double-barreled names I knew in school like Thomas Thomas and George George." I wasn't sure the Wombat wasn't pulling my leg.

The Wombat grimaced. "Dittologies like those you mention, while striking, are less pleasing than subtler names like Melanie Cherney ('black' in Greek and Russian) or Natalie and Noel Yule ('Christmas' in French, French, and English) or Bella Jaffe Schoen ('beautiful' in Italian/Spanish, Hebrew, and German). Anyway, our Welshman Latinized his name as Ioannes Audoenus, not Ioannes Ioannes. 'Owen' is supposed to mean 'young warrior,' but why don't you research it?"

"Never heard of him."

"Probably because he published exclusively in Latin, in which he produced the best and largest body of epigrams in Neo-Latin literature, outshone only by Martial fifteen hundred years before. John Owen was one of those logologists, wordsters, paronomasiacs, and lords of linguistic legerdemain who thrived in the British Isles during 'the spacious days of great Elizabeth.' Born in 1564, the same year as Shakespeare, he survived the Immortal Bard by some eleven or twelve years, probably dying between January 1627 and January 1628. It is easy to remember the number of his epigrams (1492) which he published in ten books. Forty-one of his poems are devoted entirely to word play, according to John R. C. Martyn, a recent (1976) editor of Owen, who brought out the first edition of the epigrams in 150 years; but this is surely a very low estimate, for a typically Welsh delight in words and their permutations and combinations is found on every page.

"The line from Owen that I quoted is the first one of a distich (suggested by an inferior couplet, a motto of Charlemagne's son, Lothaire I, by Matthew Borbonius) which in its entirety goes:

*Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis;
Quomodo? Fit semper tempore peior homo.*

Times change and we change in them.

How? Man always gets worse with time."

The Wombat was speaking feelingly. The cold room that had witnessed so many of the conversations in which we had "tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky" warmed up. Seeking to sustain the congeniality that I had so often enjoyed in The Marsupium I encouraged the dear beast to continue as I asked "How was he a logologist?"

"By his artful word play and wizardly way with words: etymologies, anagrams, puns, reversals, beheadments, tropes, dissections: in fine, the wordster's whole arsenal! He could plumb profundities and hoist himself to heights - all in two lines, four lines, rarely more, of 'Latin, marble's language, pure, serene.' Take this line with its enchanting alliteration, in sense far deeper than Tennyson's rather forced 'moan of doves in immemorial elms And murmuring of innumerable bees':"

Mille modis morimur mortales, nascimur uno

In a thousand ways we mortals die, [but] are born in one.

Or this encapsulated anagram with its two opposed superlatives standing side by side, but each indissolubly bound to its noun because of the matching long A's at the ends of minima and mora and short A's at the ends of maxima and Roma (the reference is to Hannibal's fatal delay after Cannae, when Maharbal said to him, 'How to conquer thou knowest, Hannibal; how to use victory thou knowest not'):

Servata est minima maxima Roma mora

Rome the greatest was saved by the smallest delay."

On a well-worn briefcase resting on his knees the Wombat then drummed out the meter of the cited lines:

-vv|-vv|--|--|{-vv|--
--|-vv|-|-vv|-vv|-

"And what could be truer or more melodious than this hemistich:

... *finis amoris amarus*

... the end of love is bitter.

"I also find most touching the polished praises he wrote to Henry, Prince of Wales, son of James I. But at the same time he also dedicated a book of epigrams to the unfortunate Lady Arabella Stuart, who some thought had a better right to the throne than James himself. Alas, Owen stopped writing about 1613, shortly after the death of Henry; and his three last poems are heartfelt complaints at the demise of one who, had he survived to become Henry IX, would have spared England its Civil Wars..."

My furry friend has an extensive knowledge of royal and noble affairs. One of his deep-seated resentments seems to be that there has never been a Henry IX in England; for, Jacobite like Dr. Johnson though he is, he balks at recognizing Cardinal York as Henry IX. The Wombat also deplores the name William given to the present

Prince of Wales's son; for he fears that, as in so many dynasties, the name of the last king will duplicate that of the first. I will not mention how he bristles when he discusses the fates of the royal Arthurs! Mr. Dick had his King Charles's Head; the Wombat has several. So, to keep him from a long discursus, I hurriedly demanded, "Give me some examples of Owen's work that today's America wordster can appreciate."

"Well, how about this true etymology, or, rather, statement of cognates: English bed and Welsh bedd (spelled 'bed' in Owen's time):

*Angli bed lectum vocitant, Cambrique sepulcrum;
Lectus enim tumuli, mortis imago sopor.*

The English call a bed a bed, and the Welsh call a tomb a bed;

A bed is indeed the image of a grave, and sleep the image of death.

Or this ancient etymology (found in Varro):

*Dicta fuit mulier quasi mollior; est tamen Eva
Non de carne sui sumpta sed osse viri.*

Woman [mulier] is named as though she were softer [mollior], but Eve

Was not taken from her husband's flesh, but his bone.

"Owen has several epigrams on Eve, including an anagram set (Eva:Eve, vae:woe, ave:hail) in a couplet addressed to Adam:

*Eva, parens mortis, malo te falsa fefellit;
Cumque tuum strueret 'vae,' tibi dixit 'ave.'*

False Eve, the mother of death, with an apple deceived you,
And, as she was causing your woe, to you said 'Hail.'

"Owen was of his time in unmercifully using the second story of creation, found in Genesis 2, with its Adam-Eve-serpent allegory to belabor women; and like Shakespeare he was obsessed with the horns of cuckoldry. He even managed to work a Greek pun on *kéras* 'horn' and *kréas* 'flesh' into one quatrain. Let's skip this stuff that dates Owen.

"Here's a rather neat epigram showing Owen's skill at dissection, in this instance giving the word (trica) from which English 'trick' ultimately comes. *Meretrix* (plural *meretrices*), however, is in reality a derivative of *mereo* 'to deserve, merit, earn, gain, acquire' and means 'she who earns money.' *Scortum* 'whore' has the primary meaning of 'skin, hide.' Festus says that *scortum* has that secondary meaning because 'they [*scorta*] are worked like skins.' Interesting that skins, when tanned, lose their fur or hair.

*Esse meras tricas meretrices, haud male dixti;
Scorta tamen raros in cute trichas habent.*

You said, by no means improperly, that meretrices (prostitutes) are mere tricks;

But whores have few *trichas* (Greek, 'hairs') on their skin.

Note the neat Latin-Greek pun *tricas-trícas*. The observation is still true today: the more sexually active or would-be active a woman is, the more concerned is she that her skin be hairfree. And, another nicety, 'to turn a trick' means to entertain a client; while a 'trick suit' is a garment easily slipped off to facilitate said entertainment.

"By the way, what is unusual about these verses:

Large and regal Alger Elgar
Kept five small letters in a bell jar,
Using them to spell his name
Plus adjectiva to the same
And tout Glare Lager via Telstar."

"Strange," thought I, "or maybe not so strange, here the Wombat is talking about John Owen and suddenly derails to that doggerel." Meanwhile I mentally pictured the poetaster's product in an attempt to analyze it.

Also meanwhile, the trench-coated trencherman had opened his briefcase, which I had assumed was packed with necessities for his journey, perhaps even including a gat; but it proved to be stuffed with what turned out to be calissons (sugar-glazed wafers filled with canteloupe, almonds, and orange), amandas (chocolate-and-cocoa-dusted almond nougat), the small, flat, coin-like goat-milk cheeses known as rocamadour, and heaven knows what else. These he not only partook of, but proffered with his usual generosity.

"Well," said I between bites, "I guess the verses are supposed to be a limerick, although there are not any anapaests in it. Undoubtedly it is designed to display the words LARGE, REGAL, ALGER, ELGAR, GLARE, and LAGER, all spelled with the same five letters. Elgar probably serves his Glare Lager in a GRAEL or a GREAL."

"Right!" commended the Wombat, likewise munching from his portable larder. "Now contrast those forced anagrams with the artistry of

*Recta fides certa est, arcet mala schismata, non est
Sicut Creta fides, fictilis; arte caret.*

The right faith is true, prevents evil schisms; it is not,
Like a Cretan's word, made of clay; it lacks artifice.

"Anyone can apply this to his own faith. The Cretan slur is a commonplace, and there are English reflexes of all the anagrams: RECTA - right, CERTA - certain, ARCET - ark, arcane, CRETA - Crete, CARET - caret."

The doors of The Marsupium opened; the chatelaine stood there and pointed with her right index finger at the back of her left wrist. "Ah, dear friend," said the Wombat rising and guiding me by the elbow toward the door, "I must go. I have enjoyed your friendship in our world of words, but now I am entering the world of deeds. Nevertheless, I would still enjoy your company if you

were able to follow me. Here is a little gift to remember me by, and a little something therein, which, if you can decipher it, tells you when and where to meet me."

We had reached the porte-cochère where stood a magnificent steel-blue 1930 Packard 745 Victoria coupé, its hood ornament of Daphne at the Well contemplating the driveway before her. The chatelaine, who had followed us out, retrieved a small package from her purse and handed it to the Wombat, who extended it to me, then opened the driver's door for his companion, walked around to the passenger's side, and climbed in as I performed for him the same office that he had for the chatelaine. The motor sprang to life, the window lowered, the Wombat stuck out his head and said, "Just remember, I am not going to Athens."

The Victoria rolled smoothly off, its driver guiding it with her usual feline fluidity and panache, and disappeared around the gate. They were gone!

I raised the package and waved. "Good-bye, Dr. Wombat!" I called.

EPILOGUE

The gift turned out to be a small edition of Propertius beautifully bound in fine linen. In the quiet of my study I turned the pages over and admired the paper which had already lasted longer than the United States had existed. As I leafed it through, savoring not only the familiar lines, but the intense black ink that embodied them, I came to Elegy XXI of Book III, which begins

Magnum iter ad doctas proficisci cogor Athenas

I am forced to set out on a great journey to learned Athens.

A bit of thin paper fell out. Unfolding it to the size of a postcard I found myself looking at a small drawing: the gate of a courtyard stood open and gave a view of a river winding through apple orchards; a radiant sun stood high in the sky and streamed through the portal. Against a wall leaned a large X made of wood. What seemed to be thongs were bound near the end of each leg, and three of the legs shared four pronounced notches between them. In the foreground, compositionally balancing the wooden X, crouched a rabbit winking one eye, as though to say "*Signum sapienti sat*" (A sign to the sapient suffices). Quite in the lower right corner stood the letters UU PINX.

Yes, dear reader, by dint of deep thought, letting my inward eye stare past the symbols so that their meaning would impinge upon my peripheral mental retina, I solved the puzzle and divined the date and place.

What followed is another story. Farewell.

Editor's Note: Readers are invited to write to the Editor with their interpretations of the Wombat's rebus; these will be published in the next issue of Word Ways.